

JOHN RUSKIN, born in London on 8th February 1819, the son of a wealthy wine merchant. Educated at King's College, London, and at Christ Church, Oxford. Won the Newdigate prize in 1839. In 1840 his health broke down and he travelled abroad, chiefly in Italy, returning to Oxford for his degree in 1842. Married Euphemia Chalmers Gray in 1848, but the marriage annulled on her petition in 1855. Inherited a fortune in 1864, and moved to Brantwood, Coniston Lake, in 1871. He was already established as the leading critic on art in England, and was defendant in a libel action brought by Whistler in 1877. In his later years he was keenly interested in economics and social reform. Died at Brantwood 20th January 1900.

RUSKIN

# THE SEVEN LAMPS OF ARCHITECTURE

INTRODUCTION BY  
SIR ARNOLD LUNN



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## INTRODUCTION

JOHN RUSKIN was born in 1819, the same year as Queen Victoria, Charles Kingsley, and Walt Whitman. His father was a wine merchant, his mother a handsome woman with a good mind, whose passionate nature was severely controlled by the code of evangelical Puritanism. Ruskin's style owes a great deal to his mother's influence, for she read the Bible with him daily, and the influence of the Hebrew Prophets is clearly apparent in his style.

Shortly after leaving Oxford Ruskin published the first volume of *Modern Painters* the main purpose of which was to vindicate Turner against his critics. Ruskin's equipment for this ambitious thesis was of the slightest. His knowledge of Ancient Masters, as Mr R. H. Wilenski was the first to show, was confined to what he had seen in the small Dulwich gallery and to a few paintings in private collections; and the immediate success of this audacious venture into Art controversy was due not only to the clear imprint of genius in every chapter but also to the fact that the main thesis of the book had an instant appeal to his readers. The 'Modern Painters' whom he discusses were almost without exception English, and their superiority to Ancient Masters, most of whom had the misfortune to be born abroad, was agreeable doctrine, as Mr Peter Quennell has pointed out, in an age in which the Englishman's national pride was unqualified by the slightest dawn of doubt. Moreover, Ruskin's thesis that modern art was superior to the ancient, conformed to the fashionable dogma of the age, the belief in inevitable progress.

On 10th April 1848 Ruskin married Euphemia Gray. The marriage was never consummated and was eventually dissolved. I agree with Mr R. H. Wilenski that 'his behaviour when his wife deserted

him and always in regard to her was perfect,' and there is nothing in Admiral Sir William James's book *The Order of Release* which refutes Mr Wilenski.

The Admiral bases much of his case on the letters which Ruskin's wife wrote to the mother of Rose de la Touche to whom at one time Ruskin hoped to be married. Ruskin's wife had married the famous painter Millais, and both of them were influenced by a fantastic legal opinion to the effect that if Ruskin married again and had children the former marriage would be held good and the divorce annulled, a terrifying possibility for a man as socially ambitious as Millais. Euphemia Gray had, therefore, to be represented as a martyr. 'For her to be a martyr,' writes Mr D. Leon, in by far the best book on Ruskin,<sup>1</sup> 'Ruskin had invariably to be represented as a monster.' Millais must have known that, even after the break up of his marriage Ruskin 'had shown him nothing but affection, and that his own conduct towards Ruskin had scarcely been above all censure, and it was probably this which prompted his first attitude of virtuous indignation. But this attitude later crystallized into a narrow malevolence.'

Ruskin never married Rose, and the over-emphasis on sex, which is characteristic of so much modern literary criticism, has led several brilliant critics to suggest that the 'frustration of Ruskin's private hopes finally brought to an end his career of public usefulness.'

Rose died in 1875, and long after her death he was appointed Slade Professor and wrote some of his best books, the *Bible of Amiens* and the charming *Praeterita* among others.

If the failure of his marriage and the frustration of his love for Rose had been factors of real importance in Ruskin's life it is unthinkable that he could have had, as he certainly did have, more influence than any

<sup>1</sup> *Ruskin the Great Victorian* (Routledge & Kegan Paul).

other contemporary in forming and changing the national taste. His influence was decisive in awakening an appreciation for Byzantine and Gothic architecture, in opening the minds of men to the beauty of the mountains (he sent Leslie Stephen and Freshfield among others to the Alps). In politics he was the real founder of Christian socialism, and Ruskin Hall at Oxford is a perpetual memorial to a man whose heart had compassion for the multitude. He was a most versatile genius. He foresaw, as Mr Wilenski, the author of another admirable *Life*, rightly says, 'our present troubles and proposed solutions on the lines now being put forward by the American economists as "Technocracy" and by English economists like F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, who has recently advocated "a multiple-commodity standard." He was the first to question the sacred dogma that gold is the only possible basis for currency.'

No critic can understand Ruskin if he is completely out of sympathy with his religion, for religion is the key to his interpretation of mountains, of art, of architecture, and of politics, and no sound criticism of his many activities is possible if the critic ignores his highly personal theology.

*The Stones of Venice* led Ruskin towards the Church of Rome, for he judged art by the Catholic criterion; but though he was attracted by the accidents of Catholicism, and though he discovered that 'all beautiful prayers were Catholic—all wise interpretations of the Bible Catholic—and every manner of Protestant written services whatsoever, either insolently altered corruptions or washed-out and ground-down rags and debris of the great Catholic collects, litanies, and songs of praise,' he remained to the last the most individualistic and Protestant of Protestants.

In 1869, Ruskin passed through a phase of great doubt and confessed to Holman Hunt that he had

ceased to believe in an Eternal Father. 'I confess this conclusion brings with it great unhappiness'; but the return to faith began a year later: 'Throughout the seventies and the early eighties,' writes Mr Leon, 'Ruskin's attitude to religion apparently underwent a slow evolution, leading him from agnosticism to profound belief. But here, again, as with his political inconsistencies, the change was far more superficial than it appeared. In fact, like Tolstoi, Ruskin had never lost his deep reverence and belief in Deity.'

Ruskin's mountain doctrine, like his aesthetic and political doctrines, is unintelligible if divorced from that theocentric context, which it has been the convention among Alpine critics resolutely to ignore. Ruskin did not regard mountains as fortuitous protuberances, whose form was solely determined by material forces. On the contrary they were 'appointed for three great offices, to give motion to water, to give motion to air, and to cause perpetual change in the soils of the earth.' 'But the feeding of the rivers and the purifying of the winds are the least of the services appointed to the hills. To fill the thirst of the human heart for the beauty of God's working—to startle its lethargy with the deep and pure agitation of astonishment, are their higher missions.'

There is organic relation between the love of what may be called Gothic landscape—Chamonix Aiguilles, for instance—and Gothic architecture. The appreciation of mountain beauty increased throughout the Gothic centuries only to decline sharply when the Renaissance restored the appreciation of classical architecture and classical landscape. The Gothic revival was associated with a rebirth of appreciation of mountain scenery. Where, as in the case of Horace Walpole, the admiration for Gothic was a pose, it was associated with an equally affected admiration for mountain scenery. Where, as in Ruskin's case, the feeling for Gothic was passionately sincere, it was

matched by an equally passionate love for mountain scenery.

Ruskin's social philosophy is again organically related to his feeling for Gothic, as emerges very clearly in one of the noblest essays in the English language, the chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice*:

The Greek gave to the lower workman no subject which he could not perfectly execute. The Assyrian gave him subjects which he could only execute imperfectly, but fixed a legal standard for his imperfection. The workman was, in both systems, a slave. But in the mediaeval, or especially Christian system of ornament, this slavery is done away with altogether; Christianity having recognized in small things as well as great, the individual value of every soul . . . go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral front where you have smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors; examine once more those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomiless and rigid; but do not mock at them for they are the signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children.

The literature of architecture is immense, but the only writers of genius whose architectural creeds have inspired them to write literary masterpieces are Ruskin and Geoffrey Scott. Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism* is a brilliant reply to Ruskin's attack on the Renaissance, but Ruskin was surely right when he contended that Renaissance architecture expressed the revolt of pagan pride against Christian humility, and of pagan infidelity against Christian faith. The Venice of the Gothic Ducal Palace had not begun to question the Christian truths. The Venice of the Palace Rezonico was already half pagan. The same change can be discerned in art. 'In old times, men used their powers of painting to show the objects of



faith; in later times, they used the objects of faith that they might show their powers of painting.'

'Those two adversaries,' writes Mr Quennell, 'the Moralist and the Aesthete battled for supremacy in the depths of Ruskin's nature,' but surely it is a trifle old-fashioned to write as if the aesthete was necessarily an amoralist. Proust, in his essay on Ruskin, repudiates as decisively as Ruskin the doctrine of art for art's sake, and the late Geoffrey Scott, that urbane humanist, and by far the most effective critic of Ruskin's identification of the Renaissance with paganism, ranges himself with Ruskin against all those who seek, as Mr Quennell apparently seeks, a complete divorce between aesthetic and ethical standards. 'For in the last resort,' writes Mr Scott, 'great art will be distinguished from that which is merely aesthetically clever by a nobility that in its final analysis is moral; or, rather, the nobility which in life we call moral, is itself aesthetic.... The "dignity" of architecture is the same "dignity" that we recognize in character.'

The rediscovery of Ruskin among young intellectuals is largely due to the influence of Proust's famous essay.

'We can forget,' wrote Proust, 'the services which he rendered to Hunt, to Rossetti, to Millais; but we cannot forget what he did for Giotto, for Caparccio, for Bellini. His divine work was not to raise up the living but to revive the dead. *Son œuvre divine ne fut pas de susciter des vivants, mais de ressusciter des morts.*'

Ruskin did not inaugurate the Gothic Revival, which had begun before the turn of the century, and indeed his influence on that revival was not wholly felicitous. His *œuvre divine* found expression, not in his influence on contemporary architecture, but in his interpretation of the past. There are still many people to whom Gothic does not appeal, but Ruskin has made it impossible for any educated person to use